

Night fell and with it came a flurry of snow bullets that did little to numb our bones. Doubt and fear and those maddening moments where every minute decision is questioned and revisited had already taken hold, and now it was just us and the ice and the snow and the ringing of river water. What initially seemed like an unforgettable cousins hiking trip to Tahquamenon Falls in Paradise, Michigan now felt like our final resting place. We were stranded on a pair of trees that the storm dislodged from their roots, our location equivocal under the canopy and snow, our cries for help drowned out by the raging river that ran below us. In the slipping and sliding that led to this point, it had claimed my cousin's phone, and the cold forbid mine from turning on. I looked at my younger cousin's pale, frostbitten face—stiffened with pain and nausea—as he closed his eyes and prayed for warmth.

I was born somewhere between two rivers, in an ancient Mesopotamian land that that once made people wonder whether sacredness had befallen it. Chaldeans, descendants of the Babylonians, are a small group of people who (once) resided in the northern villages of Iraq. But my family never experienced the grandeur those lands promised. My father fought against Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath regime, agents of evil that poisoned our God-given land. They tried to steal our voice, restrain our happiness, rob our expression. And because my father refused to surrender the greatest freedom of all, they called him a traitor. So we fled to a place where that freedom constituted its very core, in search of a new home.

Growing up in Detroit, I never harped on the dilapidation that took hold of our streets and instead wondered what struggles my neighbors had been through that day. My days varied, but they mostly involved my sister and me walking home from school to an empty house while my parents worked to fill their pockets with more than the lint they'd arrived to this country with. I may have missed a few ice cream cones and family arcade nights, but on the plus side, I had a good foundation of culinary and self-preservation skills by the age of nine. Still, as much as those realities that we often shield our children from can expedite their maturity, there are sights that no child should ever bear.

We arrived home from a wedding, still singing and dancing with the joy that customarily fills our 500-person celebratory gatherings. My uncle, who remained home due to his bipolar condition, hadn't taken his meds for a few days. His sister—my mother—went to his house and pleaded with him, but still, he resisted. When she called the police to calm him down, nine officers escorted her outside, locked the house and closed the curtains. They said they would take care of it—that everything would be fine. An hour later, they emerged from the house and my uncle was on the floor. Beaten to death in an act of unrestrained brutality. I remembered the photos of his corpse being displayed in court. The blood. The gashes on his head. My family's cries echoed throughout the courthouse as the officers responsible were prosecuted and incarcerated. But my mother's everlasting pain and guilt burned an even deeper hole in me that I knew would never be mended. That's when I made a decision—in some capacity yet to be determined—that I was going to fight for people who could not fight for themselves.

Criminal minds are intricately engineered so as to maintain their darkest secrets. I was raised on political banter—the psychopathic tendencies and warped morality of men like Hitler and Saddam being large topics amongst my family, my community. The “whys” remain up for debate, but most criminals tell their own truth, a truth that is distorted by their past and hopes for their future. Finding the logical flaws in those distortions takes a great deal of adaptability, patience and intuition to ask the right questions, and adjust to the inevitable detours.

Far from any sign of civilization, we clung to the trees above Tahquemenon Falls. I rubbed my phone against my body, and with the generated heat it turned on. Help was on the way. My little cousin felt himself slipping from the tree that became our home, weighed down by life's burdens. And then the helicopter came—and flew right past us. My little cousin cried softly against the tree.

There are some moments in our journey that compel us to dig to the ends of our core, unearthing qualities that were instilled in us at a young age, that were nurtured through sports and talks of diplomacy at the dinner table, but are needed now more than ever. And this was one of those times—no different than being down three buckets with thirty seconds to go, no different than holding my mother's shaking hand in court when she was too heartbroken to speak—when I had to be the one to burden the pressure, when I had to look a person in the eye and tell them that we were going to make it through this.

After six hours, we were saved. We suffered hypothermia. But we were alive. I spoke to the police and the press about the lack of signs around the state park, and a few days later, the Falls were shut down. Sometimes it just goes to show that speaking up can ensure another day is promised. That people—in spite of the fear and the doubt and the revisiting of decisions—are stronger than they think they are. And when wounds do heal, the scar tissue is stronger than normal flesh. As an aspiring attorney, I won't just be fighting for myself or my client. I'll be fighting for my uncle. I'll be fighting for my father, who was forced to restrain the greatest liberty of all. The courthouse won't just be a place of passion and justice, but one where I can project the voices that so often go unheard.